

JOHN BRIGHT MEMORIAL
Alfred L. Levitt

John Bright, one of the founders of the Screen Writers Guild, died on September 14, 1989. He was eighty-one years old.

Appropriately, the Board Room of the WGAw was the setting at which a group of friends, admirers, and family members gathered to pay their respects to -- and share memories of -- this remarkable man.

The family was represented by his two sons, John, Jr. and Casey Bright; his legal widow, Mildred; and the companion of his last years, Serena da Silva.

Like many screenwriters of his generation, John came from the world of journalism. He was a crime reporter in Chicago at a time when that city was considered to be the center of gangster activity. He and his friend from Chicago, Kubic Glasmon, wrote one of the earliest and most notable films of the gangster genre, Public Enemy.

In 1933, citing the economic depression as the reason, the production companies, in concert, slashed writers' pay. In some instances secretaries were earning more than the writers for whom they worked.

While most screenwriters grumbled about the situation, John and nine others met to do something. The others were Kubic Glasmon, Courtenay Terrett, Brian Marlow, Lester Cole, Samson

Raphaelson, John Howard Lawson, Edwin Justus Mayer, Louis Weitzenkorn, and Bertram Block.

Discovering that the only film employees whose pay was not cut were those protected by union contracts, the idea of a union of screenwriters was discussed, and was, of course, ultimately realized. The Screen Writers Guild was formed.

John's Chicago friend and collaborator, Kubic Glasmon, deserted that group, and became one of the founders of a company union that called itself the Screen Playwrights.

John fought "the good fight" on many fronts. In the late thirties he was active in the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the Motion Picture Democratic Committee, and many other liberal and progressive organizations. He was an especially passionate participant in fights against racism and prejudice in all their many guises, whether directed against blacks, Hispanics, Asians, or anyone else.

Helen and I, having married a year earlier, arrived here from New York in 1939 -- which, your arithmetic will tell you, was fifty-one years ago. (We married very young. I was eight, she was pushing three.)

At that time John was married to Josephine. John's close friend and collaborator, Bob Tasker, was married to Racquel. They and their dogs all lived in a house on Fountain Avenue. In a community in which beauty was commonplace, those four people stood out -- not only for their extraordinary good looks, but also for their talent, their intellect, and their concern and

activism in behalf of those less fortunate than themselves.

John and Bob were then under contract to Paramount. They wrote an original screenplay for the studio, a screenplay that they felt was the best work they had ever done. It was a sensitively told story about an older, wealthy, married man who falls compulsively in love with a very much younger woman.

Both collaborators were exultant when they handed in their script -- and were shocked and dismayed to learn that they were fired because of it.

Unwittingly, their screenplay had paralleled the real-life, clandestine romance that was going on between the head of the studio and a very young actress.

Eighteen years ago John wrote a letter to his two sons in which he stated his views -- and counseled them -- about a number of aspects of life.

He said this about art:

It's the only marriage between thinking and feeling which, with love, makes the world endurable. Without such men as Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Da Vinci and Picasso (to cite only a few of the giants) civilization is reduced to the level of Mississippi.

John had many commitments that made demands on his time. Nevertheless, with patience, kindness, and knowledge he helped and encouraged me in my first efforts at writing for the screen. I am certain that I am not the only writer who has benefited from his wisdom and generosity.

It is not uncommon for a person who holds strongly felt, but unpopular, ideas and ideals in the prime years of his life to drop them or modify them, or sometimes to reverse them, in later years.

Not John.

He remained firm and fiery in his beliefs in spite of blacklisting and harassment. If he had lived to be one hundred and one instead of a mere eighty-one, the fire would continue to burn -- with less heat, perhaps -- but with the same (if you'll forgive me) Bright light.

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